

Submitter: Gregg Heacock
On Behalf Of:
Committee: Senate Committee On Education
Measure: SB1534

SB 1534 deserves your support. Arguments opposing this bill on the grounds that it will threaten the standards set for professional teachers ignore the fact that teachers need help if we are to address the growing problem of students not developing the reading skills needed to succeed in their classes as they move toward graduation without retaining what they should have been learning in our schools. SB 1534 addresses this problem and does so in a cost-effective way. Even professionals could use a little help.

Teaching reading from the ground up, is not as easy as we thought. In earlier testimony, I said that I was a Reading Specialist, certificated in both California, where I taught full-time, and in Oregon, where I have worked as a substitute in various classrooms. This suggests I know a thing or two. But there's a lot I don't know! Despite my working in the Even Start Program, teaching Spanish-speaking parents English so they could help their children in school and at home—something we might try—I still don't know how to teach how the sounds of their home languages are represented in letters that make different sounds in English. I, too, would benefit from some basic instruction on developing phonemic awareness as it relates to the phonics of different languages.

Here is what I do know:

I know how to teach a deeper comprehension of text through a dialectical approach to grammar, where asking certain questions identifies words that address those questions and deepens comprehension while reading.

I know that children quickly learn the difference between statements of fact and statements of opinion, which helps them sort out the meaning of "Birds fly" when they can identify many birds that don't fly.

I know children come to school already equipped with logical challenges, like "Oh, yeah?" "So what?" and "Yes, but!" to question the acceptability, relevance, and grounds for what adults have to say.

I know language is based on ambiguity that allows us to use the same words as others in expressing our opinions while our meaning might be entirely different from what others have in mind. This allows us to be civil while ignoring the possibility that we may be wrong.

I also know how to teach young and older students how to use inductive reasoning I learned when reading poetry: by noticing details and patterns, considering their implications, reflecting on our own emotional and intellectual responses and questions that remain, then, drawing conclusions from this process about ourselves and what we have read. Poems are word puzzles, where the meaning is in the mystery. Our understanding cannot be measured by getting right answers on a test.

In short, there is much to learn about reading that goes well beyond the so-called “science of reading” and would engage the interest of older students and many adults who could benefit from preparing themselves to help out in classrooms and in tutoring programs after school.

Presently, community colleges are suffering from low enrollment. Were they to offer classes in the community that were more accessible, they could provide training for many who would like to help with reading instruction in our public schools. This training could be extended to include high school students, seeking transitional employment as tutors while they consider their career options once they graduate from high school. SB 1534 opens the door to providing solutions that offer extra benefits.

Ever since our governor made early literacy a priority, we have wondered how to fund it. Those who oppose SB 1534 on the grounds that would lower the standards set for our certified teachers, would have us imagine there is no problem here to be addressed. The words of Hemingway come to mind: “It’s pretty to think so.” But let me be less oblique and more direct: “It’s pretty stupid to think so!”

Don’t buy into “stupid”: Vote to pass SB 1534!

Gregg Heacock, urging you to support teachers doing their best!